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What does embarrassment have to do with our choice of brands?

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Everyone experiences moments of embarrassment – when their credit cards are rejected at the checkout, they are wearing their T-shirt inside out, or have to buy tampons or condoms in a store.

When people are embarrassed it is only natural they behave differently to try to make themselves feel better. But how do they cope with feeling embarrassed? What types of strategies do they adopt and how does all this relate to their self-esteem?

Self-Esteem Influences Our Choices

Our research study “[The effect of embarrassment on preferences for brand conspicuousness: The roles of self-esteem and self-brand connection](#)” aimed to answer these questions.

We found that embarrassed consumers with different levels of self-esteem have distinct coping strategies when they feel their self-image has been threatened, leading to differences in their preferences for eye-catching brands.

Our results can prove useful in helping marketers better understand how consumers respond to embarrassment by making product choices.

Studies and Results

Three studies were carried out in a university to examine how embarrassment influences consumer preferences for brand conspicuousness.

Two weeks before the studies began, participants in each study were asked to complete a questionnaire about self-esteem to assess whether they had high or low levels of self-esteem.

Study 1

This study tested the idea that embarrassment and self-esteem can influence preferences for brand conspicuousness. A total of 134 undergraduate students had to learn a difficult and unfamiliar song in Chinese. Students in the embarrassment group had to sing it in front of other people; those in the control group simply wrote out the lyrics on paper in private. The two groups also had to rate how much they liked two Nike T-shirts (one with a bolder logo than the other) and ranked their embarrassment when singing.

The results showed that embarrassment and self-esteem interact to affect people's preferences for a more eye-catching product design. Compared with the control-group, participants with low self-esteem showed less interest in the bolder design when embarrassed, while students with high self-esteem were more interested in the bolder design when embarrassed.

Study 2

Half of the 143 undergraduate students in the study was asked to recall an event that made them feel embarrassed; the others were to describe a typical school day. Then, both groups looked at two Nike sweaters, one with a larger logo and the other with a smaller logo, and said which one they preferred. They also rated how they felt while recalling the embarrassing event.

Once again, the results suggested that participants with low self-esteem were more interested in discreet logos when embarrassed, and with a greater desire to avoid attracting attention. But the embarrassed participants with higher self-esteem were more interested in bolder designs, suggesting they were keen to revive their image.

Study 3

249 undergraduate students viewed a 30-second television commercial twice. Half of them watched an advertisement for condoms while the other half saw a commercial for an Apple computer. Participants were then asked to discuss the products, say when they would use them, and also rank their embarrassment during the discussion. They also read a text about sports brands Nike and Adidas. Nike was said to be innovative, playful, aggressive and outgoing, whereas Adidas was traditional, serious, cooperative and undemonstrative. Half of the students were asked to identify personal characteristics they shared with Adidas and the ways they differed from Nike; the other half shared the same about Adidas. All participants also had to say which of two Adidas shirts they preferred - the one with a larger logo or with a smaller logo.

The third study provided further evidence that the coping method shown in Study 1 and Study 2 were stronger when people identified themselves closer to the brand, but weaker when they felt distant from the brand.

So What Did We Learn?

People attempt to cope with embarrassing situations in two ways: first, they try to avoid attracting attention; second, they try to help others project a positive view of themselves to attract greater attention and repair their damaged image.

Consumers often choose a certain product because of the images or personal traits associated with it. Some products, such as those of Nike and Adidas, carry instantly identifiable brand

markers such as bold logos, which help people notice them. These kinds of conspicuous branding are found to be more effective at attracting the public's attention.

When people are embarrassed, they want to repair their damaged self-images. To do so, they may want to draw the attention to themselves by wearing an eye-catching brand to increase the chance of being noticed. But others may want to deal with their embarrassment by trying to hide and avoid attracting attention.

Therefore, it can be argued that a consumer's preference for a particular, noticeable brand will depend on how they choose to cope with their embarrassment.

How Brand-Connection Affects Choices

Consumers choose a certain brand to satisfy their need to hide or to repair their image depends on how much they feel the brand is "a part of me". People with low self-esteem, who identify themselves closely with a brand, may not wish to draw attention to themselves, thus will be less likely to pick a noticeable brand. But those with low self-esteem with no connection with any brand will decide to keep a low profile without having any consumer preference.

Consumers with high self-esteem, on the other hand, may feel a strong connection with an eye-catching brand. They will feel motivated to choose that product to make themselves feel more visible to others and repair their image.

Another research from Prof. Lisa Wan, School of Hotel and Tourism Management of the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) Business School, also looked at the conditions affecting the behavior of consumers when encountering embarrassing products or services.

In her study, consumers showed less intention of purchase in an embarrassing consumption situation such as weight-loss services when the salespersons were attractive.

"These embarrassing consumptions are likely to endanger the positive self-image a consumer is motivated to convey in social situations, particularly when the other person is attractive and whom he or she wants to impress," said Prof. Wan.

Conclusion

Consumers often experience embarrassment. Our research examined how this influences people's preferences for either more noticeable or less visible brand logos. We found consumers with different levels of self-esteem adopt distinct coping strategies when embarrassed, resulting in differences in the way they choose or reject highly visible brands.

When embarrassed, consumers with low self-esteem are likely to be more motivated to avoid attracting attention to themselves, while those with high self-esteem will be more motivated to attract attention to repair their image.

Therefore, consumers with low self-esteem are less likely to pick a product with an eye-catching design when they are embarrassed than when they are not embarrassed. In contrast, those with high self-esteem will be more motivated to choose a highly visual design in times of embarrassment.

We also showed the interaction between self-esteem and embarrassment is more likely to occur when consumers have formed a strong connection with the brand.

Implication

Our research helps to expand the understanding of consumer embarrassment by demonstrating the role of self-esteem in predicting how consumers respond to feeling embarrassed by making product choices.

Marketers need to consider the conspicuousness of brands when developing future products. Brands with highly visible logos may appeal to consumers whose main aim is to use them to attract attention and regain approval. But such brands may not be popular with people who prefer to avoid attracting attention.

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